

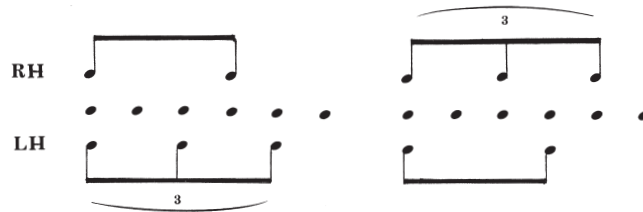
CROSS RHYTHMS WITHOUT TEARS

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The ability to play cross rhythms with ease is an essential part of an advanced pianist's technique, but it is much better if the skill is acquired at an early stage. An excellent introduction to cross rhythms can be found in the second volume of Bartók's Mikrokosmos. In a piece for two pianos, Triplets in Lydian Mode, pupils learn the sound of two against three in the final phrase in which there are two bars where Piano 1 has triplets of quavers while Piano 2 has pairs of quavers.

Before a pupil attempts to play a cross rhythm he must first be able to divide a steady beat into two, three or four equal parts. A useful preliminary exercise is to practise clapping pairs of quavers, then triplets and finally groups of four semiquavers to a metronome set at crotchet = 60. The exercise is more interesting if it is performed by teacher and pupil, with the teacher calling out directions such as 'Twos, Fours, Threes, Twos' until the pupil can change without hesitation.

Now suppose the pupil has to play a cross rhythm of two against three for the first time. Explain that in order to work out how the two rhythmic patterns fit together we must find the lowest common multiple of two and three, which is six. Then draw a diagram to show where the two hands will play in relation to six dots equally spaced.



Next ask the pupil to tap the above examples on his knees, first with each hand alone and then with both hands together, while you tap the six dots. He should soon recognise that the combined effect of the two patterns creates the rhythmic pattern

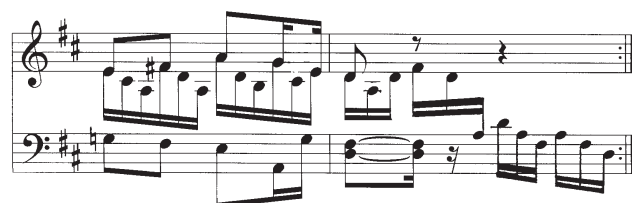


Move both hands on to the keyboard and play the following exercise:

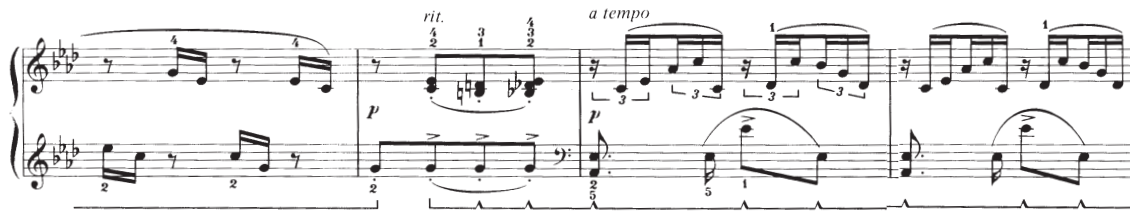


When this is secure, try a scale in similar motion with two notes in the left hand and three in the right hand saying 'Both, right, left, right' or 'Come follow me'. Then try a scale in similar motion with three notes in the left hand and two in the right. This time the right hand will have to start two octaves above the left or it will soon be overtaken! These exercises will ensure that the pupil has both the mental understanding and the physical ability to play a cross rhythm.

The beautiful Heller Study in D, Op 46, No 8 (Volume 6 First Impressions) may provide the first opportunity of putting the technique into practice. Tap the right hand of bar 7 first, add the left hand, repeat until it sounds comfortable and only then play it on the piano.



In Heller's Study Op 47, No 23 the cross rhythm in bars 27 and 28 is complicated by the semiquaver rests in the right hand and the dotted quaver in the left.



Write out bar 27 as below and practise tapping it:

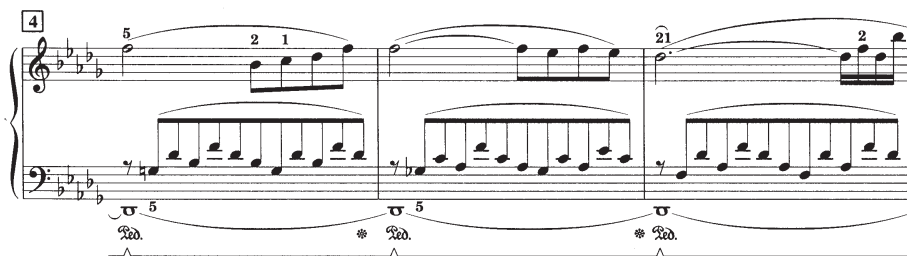
Finally tap the printed version before attempting to play it on the piano.

There are several examples of cross rhythms in Schumann's Abschied, Op 82, No 9, one of the pieces on the current Grade 8 Associated Board syllabus. Encourage the pupil to tap out bars 8 to 10 on his knees before playing it. Then practise tapping the right hand of bar 16 against a steady dotted crotchet beat in the left hand and finally tap both hands of bars 17 and 18. To assist the understanding of the timing of bar 20 remove the ties at first. In bar 31 the right hand has to play both the elements of the cross rhythm, but by this stage the sound of the two and the three quavers played together should be so familiar that it should cause no trouble.

Removing the ties in the initial stages of learning the charming May Song, Op 1, No 3 by Granados will allow the pupil to relate the timing of bars 10 and 12 to his earlier practice of scales with three notes in the right hand and two in the left.



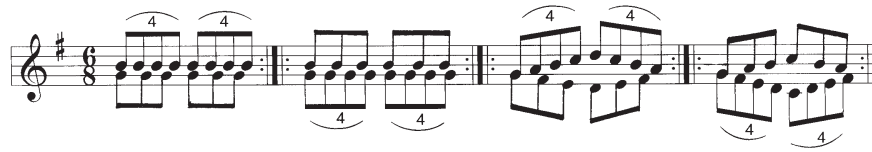
Liszt's lovely Consolations include a variety of cross rhythms. The third Consolation introduces both two against three and three against four in the first six bars!



Draw twelve dots to work out how the group of three and the group of four fit together and practise tapping the patterns as before. Notice that unlike the two against three diagram, the notes in this diagram are not evenly spaced.

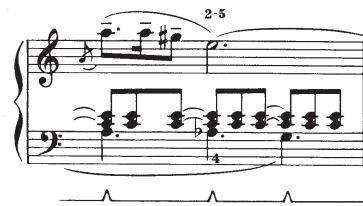


Practise tapping on the knees, saying ‘Both, right, left, right, left, right’, or words such as ‘Now see the silver moon’. Then play the two exercises below before trying scales with three notes in one hand and four in the other.

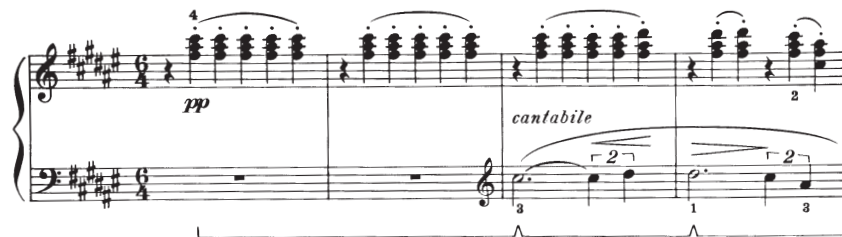


In bar 6 of the Consolation, and in other similar places, it will be helpful to remove the tie in the right hand until the four against three can be played with ease. Similarly in Grieg’s Melody Op 38, No 3 begin by letting the left hand play in the quaver rest in the bars where the right hand has a triplet of crotchets against four quavers in the left hand.

Grieg’s Lyric Pieces contain many more examples of cross rhythms. In the well known Notturmo, Op 54, no 4 remove the ties until the cross rhythm is secure.



The Scherzo which follows features two against three played prestissimo. To achieve this, practise each bar several times at a slow pace, always leading on to the first beat of the next bar, then gradually increase the speed. In To Spring, Op 43, No 6 it is essential to begin by feeling two dotted minim beats. Count aloud and tap the rhythm of the opening bars, if necessary removing the left hand ties until the timing is secure.



The third bar of Berceuse, Op 38, No 1 presents a problem which can soon be solved by playing the lower notes of the right hand part with the left hand until the desired sound is memorised.



Chopin’s music too is full of cross rhythms, but the pupil who has practised the above examples should be able to master them by applying the same kinds of strategies. For example, in the famous Fantaisie-Impromptu tap the four against three on both knees many times before trying to play it and if there is still any difficulty substitute a note for the semiquaver rest.

Our pupils will always be grateful to us if we enable them to acquire the means to play with fluency and confidence these wonderful pieces from the piano repertoire.

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